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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5296
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0098
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000737

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR; SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN/IRAN: ASHGABAT RESIDENT RECOUNTS
JAILING/FLOGGING IN IRAN

ASHGABAT 00000737 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

. (C) On June 7, a Turkmen citizen residing in Ashgabat recounted to Iran Watcher his recent ordeal returning to Turkmenistan from Armenia by bus, when he was arrested for possession of alcohol when reentering Iran. Vitalik, a 30-year old ethnic Armenian and barber by profession, had traveled from Ashgabat to Yerevan, and then on to Nagorno-Karabakh by bus with his wife and two young children to visit his grandmother.

12. (C) Vitalik said the two-day bus trip through Iran to Armenia was mostly uneventful. However, when the women on the bus disembarked briefly without the proper head covering, police and then security personnel were called and were going to fine the passengers. The Iranian bus driver reportedly spoke to the authorities and they were allowed to proceed. At one point, the bus apparently passed near a village where a military installation was located, and there were signs posted in English warning against taking photographs.

THE OFFENSE: FIVE BOTTLES OF ARMENIAN COGNAC

13. (C) After spending two weeks in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Vitalik and his family and twenty other passengers were reentering Iran at noon at the border crossing town of Jolfa, when Iranian customs agents stopped the bus and ordered them to open their luggage for inspection. Vitalik was carrying five bottles of a rare, aged Armenian cognac (gifts from relatives) that normally sells for \$150/bottle. The customs officials reportedly also found two bottles of champagne in the luggage of an ethnic Armenian from Iran, as well as several "adult" magazines in Russian that two young women had purchased, all of which they seized. Vitalik was questioned and told that he was liable for a fine of \$300. The bus apparently was then held up for several hours and not allowed to proceed, as Customs Agents had departed on a mid-day break. He and his family, as well as the Iranian family with the champagne, were later taken off the bus, which then continued north towards the Turkmen border. Vitalik's passport was confiscated, and he was handcuffed and taken to the local police station. He said

that he offered to pay the fine, but was told that evidence was being gathered for a "court proceeding" against him, in which possession of each bottle of cognac was to be considered a separate offense. His wife and two children then had to make their way to the Bajgyran border crossing alone by taxi. At the police station, Vitalik asked to call his brother in Ashgabat, but was told he could not use the phone. He was able to briefly use the cellphone of the Iranian-Armenian arrestee, he said, and explained the situation to his brother and asked him to meet his family at the Turkmen border. He described then being moved from "empty room to empty room" for several hours, was given documents in Farsi (which he does not read) and told to sign them. The officials sometimes spoke to him in Azeri, he said, which, due to its similarity to Turkmen, he could understand somewhat.

MEDIEVAL JAIL CONDITIONS

¶4. (C) Vitalik said he was then taken to the jail in Jolfa, which he described as a "medieval, dungeon-like" underground structure. He was placed in a separate cell with a small cot and bedding that looked so dirty he preferred to rest on the ground. For the three days of his detention, each morning he was given only a half-loaf of flat (lavash) bread and a small bottle of water for the entire day. The prison guards communicated with him in Farsi, and he said that, surprisingly, "perhaps out of an instinct to survive," he began to pick up Farsi and communicate in simple words with the guards. For the next two days, he said he was taken to a two-story courthouse near the jail for proceedings. The first set of judges wore white robes, the second gray, and the last, who appeared to be the highest judicial officials, wore black. Vitalik several times offered to pay the fine, which he was told had been increased to \$500, and told that

ASHGABAT 00000737 002.2 OF 002

he had also been sentenced, in accordance with law, to 30 "shalaag" or lashes. He said he received the lashings on the third day, when he was made to lie facedown on a wooden plank, and that the Iranian-Armenian detainee received 20 lashings, as did another Iranian (unconnected to the bus group) who had apparently been convicted of possession of a television satellite dish. Vitalik was then released, and took a series of taxis, he said, from Jolfa to Tabriz, Tabriz to Tehran (the trip through Tehran traffic alone took 12 hours, he said), and then from Tehran to Mashhad. Some European tourists in Mashhad gave him a ride to the border at Bajgyran.

MFA CONSULAR AFFAIRS: "DON'T TALK TO US ABOUT IRAN"

¶5. (C) After he returned to Ashgabat, Vitalik said he went to the Consular Affairs Section of the MFA to make a formal complaint about his jailing and mistreatment in Iran, and the fact that there had been no warnings or information provided about the illegality of transiting the country with alcohol. He said the official he met with simply "threw up his hands" and said, "Please, not Iran. Don't talk to us about Iran. It's useless. Even large companies cannot protect their own employees in Iran."

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Our interlocutor's unfortunate trip through Iran was his first trip abroad. In fact, he had never previously traveled outside of Ashgabat. His account of his ordeal was highly credible and detailed. Ironically, it was one of Vitalik's clients, the Iranian manager of the Iran Khodro office in Ashgabat, who had been telling him of the "marvels" of Iran and encouraged him to visit his country sometime. He said that the Khodro official was "sad and ashamed" when he learned what had happened to Vitalik, and said, "That government does not represent us." Following his return, Vitalik learned that he had been selected in the U.S. Diversity Visa Lottery. He plans to immigrate to the U.S. next year, where the family will reside with an uncle in Los Angeles. END COMMENT.

MILES